

Local TV Part 3: Don't start linear

This is the last in a three-part series of posts on the problematic aspects of the Government's **plan for local TV** in the UK. Unlike the previous posts, which pointed out the **lack of network** support and overly **ambitious expectations** for content, no Dickensian literary reference was appropriate to title this one. The proposal, to use the digital terrestrial television (DTT) platform and create linear television stations across the UK, is already old fashioned enough. It is admirable to invest in local media, but new technology allows more innovative and more sustainable ways of doing it. Putting local TV onto DTT multiplexes (MUXs), even in a first stage as the Government proposes, is an unnecessary investment, and one that sets local television off on the wrong foot in terms of both sustainability and purpose.

A poor investment

Despite the fact that the **Review on the commercial viability** of local television commissioned by the Government reported that Internet protocol television (IPTV) is the most appropriate platform for local TV, the framework put forth by DCMS envisions a first phase during which local TV is broadcast on Freeview through DTT. Even though it refers to DTT as a transitional solution, it plans for a private company to build and manage the local MUXs, assisted by a capital investment from the BBC of £25 million. At the moment DTT can reach more people than any internet based form of transmission that requires a broadband connection. However, as of 2010 more than 70% of households in the UK had access to broadband. The Government is already investing heavily in broadband infrastructure as part of its plan to ensure all household have **superfast broadband by 2015**. Local TV is due to start broadcasting on DTT in 2013.



Do we need local DTT also using spectrum?

Putting money into local DTT as a phase before IPTV seems like a poor choice, and not just because it is set up to be obsolete within 2 years of its launch. Even before then it is not likely to be cost effective for the local TV providers who are expected to pay for transmission. Local TV is most likely to develop in larger urban areas where broadband penetration is even higher than the national level. In these areas local TVs can reach most of their populations without paying for distribution through DTT. Having a prominent position in Freeview on the DTT platform does have great benefits in terms of catching the attention of channel flipping audiences. However, this only really works in the old fashioned linear model of broadcasting, i.e. if you have 24, or at least 12, hours of interesting content for viewers to happen upon. The costs of producing or procuring content to fill a linear broadcast schedule might outweigh the benefits of being prominent on DTT, or reaching that last percentage of the population that doesn't have broadband. If many of the local TV providers chose not to go onto DTT, it is hard to see how the company operating the MUXs will even last through the first phase the Government intends.

IPTV more fit for purpose

One of the reasons that Nicholas Shott, who conducted the commercial viability review, suggested IPTV as the best platform for local TV is because it lends itself to non-linear broadcasting and interaction. Non-linear broadcasting will allow producers of local TV to produce as much content as they can afford without the pressure to fill a programme schedule. In addition to regular news or discussion programmes that will keep people coming back, local TVs can have more or less other programming depending on local events or current issues, as well as their budgets.

Some of the reasons the Government says it wants to invest in local TV are to get people more in touch with what is going on in their communities, help hold local institutions accountable and promote civic engagement. Internet based, non-linear ways of getting content to audiences offer much more potential in terms of meeting these goals than traditional, linear free to air television. More traditional programme formats such as news and talk shows can be combined with blogs, forums, and other ways that audiences can engage with the content and in discussion about local issues.

Redirect investment

The Government should not give up on the idea of supporting the development of local TV in the UK. It should, however, re-think how it plans to do it. Local TV is already happening and it is happening online. There are small operations run by community groups or using journalism departments at universities such as [Sangat TV](#) or [Leeds television](#). There are even commercial operations looking to provide online platforms for local TV such as [View TV local](#). There are also a host of local newspapers across the country with teams of journalists covering local events and issues that might be able to produce good quality local programmes appropriate for IPTV.

Just because it is digital doesn't mean that DTT is a truly modern platform or way of broadcasting television. Local TV can make use of non-linear, interactive ways platforms that will still reach most of the population. There doesn't need to be an investment in terrestrial networks. Instead the Government can look into creative ways of supporting local television by investing in groups and institutions to produce and popularise local news and other content. These may not all be commercially viable enterprises, but may be better suited to promoting civic engagement and local dialogue. Getting efforts to further develop local TV off to a good start means being realistic about what local TV can provide to audiences and not locking it into an old fashioned linear model of broadcasting that will be expensive to run and difficult to sustain.

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